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ABSTRACT

For several years, one educator has taught Charles Dickens's "Great Expectations" to eighth and ninth graders. She recently discovered a woman writer of the 18th century whose novel could be taught using the same format used to teach Dickens's novel. Fanny Burney's "Evelina" is an exceptional book, effective not only for teaching the epistolary novel form, but also for teaching etiquette, teenage relationships, the "rites of passage" theme, and for teaching about 18th-century London society. Prior to the reading, students do some journal writing on such topics as trying to impress someone, committing a social blunder, and picking an adult figure in whom they can confide. Students are then given copies of one or more letters from the book and asked to write a summary of the letter, including their reactions to the letter. Students are divided into small groups to discuss key ideas from the novel. The small groups then discuss their findings with the entire class. (CR)

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Teaching Ideas and Topics

Teaching the Epistolary Novel Form through Fanny Burney's Evelina

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This teaching idea is excerpted from the March 1994 issue of Notes Plus, published by the National Council of Teachers of English.

For several years I have taught Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* to eighth graders and ninth graders. The formats I use vary, depending on the time allowed and the level of teaching. Yet, after participating in a Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute for Teachers in the summer of 1993 in a course called "The Development of the English Novel: A (Re)Discovery of Women's Writing," I discovered a woman writer of the eighteenth century whose novel could be taught using the same format that I use to teach Dickens's.

Fanny Burney's *Evelina* is an exceptional book, not only for teaching the epistolary novel form, but also for teaching etiquette, teenage relationships, the "rites of passage theme, and London society in the eighteenth century.

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My students do some journal writing prior to the reading. Topics like the ones below are enjoyable to write about and help the students to identify later with the protagonist's struggles.

Journal Writing Topics

1. Tell about a time when you tried to impress a boy (if you are a girl) or a girl (if you are a boy) in order to either get him or her to notice you or to not look foolish in front of him or her. What happened?

2. Tell about a time when you committed a major social blunder, whether it be at the mall, a dance, at school, on a date, at someone's house, or anywhere. What happened? How did you feel?

3. Tell about a time when you were discovered in public by someone you were trying to impress and you were with a group of people (or even one person) you would rather die than be seen with.

4. Describe the one adult figure you can confide in. What makes this person easy to talk to? Why do you tell this person your deepest fears, dreams, etc.?

5. Were you ever taken advantage of because you were female? young? inexperienced in a particular situation? Describe that situation.

6. What are some lines you use to get a boy or girl to notice you or to go out with you? What works? What doesn't work? Why not?

After discussing these topics in class, I then introduce the students to Fanny Burney and her novel. I explain to the students that most women of the eighteenth century could only write in the epistolary format. Then I give them a little background on attitudes of women writers during that period.

I next hand each student an envelope (in smaller

classes students may get two or three envelopes) that has the date of a letter written on it. Inside the envelope is a letter torn from the book Evelina and a half sheet of paper with these instructions:

Read the letter.

On the half sheet of paper (using front and back), write a summary of the letter by briefly telling about the author, audience, plot, characters, and setting. Include any reactions you may have to the contents of the letter.

I give the students a week to complete this assignment at home. During that week, we do small-group research in class on various aspects of London society mentioned in the novel (Drury Lane, St. James Park, Kensington Gardens, balls, theatres, opera, etc.), on the dress and social customs of the eighteenth century, on the music and dance of the period, and on life as a woman writer at the time. Students make visual aids to display in the classroom and report their group findings to the entire class on Friday. Videos of London can also be obtained from the local library. This week of research helps the students to identify further with what they are reading.

The second week the students read and discuss their summaries in class, and we hold discussions on the epistolary form; characterization; themes such as the "rites of passage," social blunders, and initiation into the adult world; London social life; plot; and any other topics that arise. Of course, activities such as character webs, letters written by the students to the characters, character "trees" to show the relationships among the characters, and other writing exercises can be incorporated into this week's discussions.

Next I divide the students into small groups and have them discuss key ideas from the novel. The small groups then discuss their findings with the entire class.

I find this method successful, especially with slower readers and junior high students, because it exposes them to literature they may not otherwise read and it allows us to cover a long and perhaps

difficult novel in a short period. (For example, I may teach Great Expectations in the same format by dividing the book as Dickens wrote it, giving each student three consecutive chapters such that each third chapter ends in a "cliffhanger." The students love seeing the book being torn apart. We study Dickens's writing methods and put the book back together again at the end of this study.)

This unit may also be used to introduce other epistolary novels such as Pamela or The Color Purple, or to illustrate how history is preserved in people's letters. You might even have the students begin keeping a letter-style journal for a month or so and then combine those letters that were "written" to friends, parents, or other relatives into the student's own "novella."

At the end of our Evelina unit, the students enjoy a word puzzle as a review. They also enjoy participating in a "British Tea," for which the students bring refreshments such as scones, shortbread, jam, tea, etc. We have quite a class party.

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